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ABSTRACT

This profile in outline form of the English language teaching situation in Hong Kong provides a brief background of the social, economic, and linguistic situation, and covers the following topics: the role of English, English within the educational system, the teaching cadre, teaching materials, English outside the educational system, and British and American support for the teaching of English. The profile concludes with a general statement concerning the weaknesses and strengths of the English language teaching situation in Hong Kong. A small bibliography and brief remarks concerning current research are included. (CLK)

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ENGLISH-TEACHING INFORMATION CENTRE

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROFILE

COUNTRY: Hong Kong

2 July 1975

1. Background

1.1 Hong Kong is a British Crown Colony, perched on the edge of mainland China, with a population of 4+ million. 98% of the population is Chinese and mostly refugees from China. 81% speak Cantonese, with sizable minorities speaking other forms of Chinese, Portuguese, Malay or English.

1.2 The city has a highly competitive atmosphere and a record of growth at dizzying speed. It is a leading Asian, and world, banking and financial centre, has a large and very efficient textile industry, one of the world's most buoyant stock markets, in spite of the current recession, and one of the highest scales of property values of any major city; it attracts over a million tourists a year. Its port is a key point for world shipping, well equipped to handle container traffic, and with an under-harbour tunnel to handle road traffic. Its sophisticated computerised switched data service makes it Asia's centre of telecommunications.

2. The Role of English

2.1 English is built into the educational system. It is one of the two official languages of government and the courts. It is the medium of instruction at the University of Hong Kong and in the Anglo-Chinese schools, and the second language in the Chinese medium schools. The standards of these institutions are very high; the 'A' level English papers are often of a standard it would be difficult to surpass in Britain. This applies, however, only to the elite; for it is the private sector which provides education for the majority, and in these schools standards can be very low.

2.2 The city works and lives in a pivotal bilingual situation between the East (particularly China) and the West. Both English and Chinese are vital to it, for Hong Kong's importance lies in serving as a bridge between them.

2.3 English is the common study language in all subjects except Chinese and Chinese culture. Where practicable it is replaced by Chinese as a study language in the Chinese medium schools and at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

2.4 English is widely used within the country as a medium of communication particularly in government and its associated fields; in education; in banking and commerce; in the tourism and entertainment industry; and in all technological fields.

2.5 Hong Kong is essentially an Asian nerve-centre of communication in all fields. English, though rarely the native language, is almost invariably used as the medium of this international communications network.

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3. English Within the Educational System

3.1 In the past Hong Kong schools were neither compulsory nor free, but in 1971 free primary education was introduced in government schools, and the Director of Education given powers to order children to school if it seemed schooling was being unnecessarily withheld. The quality of government schools is generally high and that of most private schools low.

3.2 The Hong Kong Department of Education serves as a model for the Far East, and the range of its services and technology make it a pacemaker for the area. It is especially strong in the field of audio-visual education. Its great drawback, or perhaps advantage, is that it serves a minority of the population, selected by competitive examinations, but this minority it serves very efficiently.

3.3 The following table gives details of types of Institution and enrolment in 1974:

		Govt & Aided	Private	Total
Kindergarten	Enrolment	- -	143,706	143,706
	Number	- -	778	
Primary	Enrolment	577,004	144,513	721,517
	Number	751	499	
Secondary	Enrolment	98,118	246,053	334,171
	Number	185	408	
Technical Institutes	Enrolment	13,919	-	13,919
	Number	2	-	
Post-Secondary and Adult	Enrolment	11,911	42,280	54,191
	Number	2	249	

In all there were 2,623 schools and 35,544 teachers.

The 3 teacher training colleges had a further 2,998 students, the University of Hong Kong 3,914 students, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong 3,068 students.

3.4 At the primary level (6 years) English is taught usually from Primary III sometimes from Primary I, and occupies about 25% of the timetable. Primary schools are bi-sessional, ie there are two school populations, one AM and one PM, and the medium of instruction is Chinese.

At the secondary level (5 years) the practice varies. At Grammar Schools, Trade and Technical, and Secondary Modern Schools, English is the medium of instruction, is taught as a subject, and a pass in English is necessary for

the School Leaving Certificate. These English medium schools are the most sought-after as providing the best opportunities for future employment. In the Chinese medium middle schools it is taught as a subject, usually for 9 or 10 periods a week, but is not necessary for the School Leaving Certificate. At the Post-Secondary Colleges it is sometimes the medium of instruction.

In the University of Hong Kong it is the medium of instruction except in the Department of Chinese, and a first year course in English Language is compulsory for all Arts students. At the Chinese University of Hong Kong some classes are in English, though the medium of instruction is Chinese, and students are expected to become bilingual in 4 years.

3.5 There is a distinction between Language and Literature from the secondary level onwards. Language takes up by far the bulk of the resources, and little interest is shown in literature, as being less obviously useful in obtaining future employment.

3.6 An Educational White Paper, issued in October 1974, made major recommendations for the reorganisation of the "junior secondary courses" (1 - 3), involving the abandoning of the Secondary School Entrance Examination, and the provision of 3 years of secondary education for all (a total of 9 years free education); at the same time, practical subjects were to be introduced into the junior secondary courses. The subsequent deterioration in Hong Kong's financial situation may make the implementation of this ambitious plan difficult by the year 1978/9, as was originally hoped, but the implications for the curricula in Primary and Lower Secondary classes have been given serious consideration, and new syllabuses in all subjects are under construction. Special attention is being paid to the syllabuses of English, and the Council has been involved in efforts to reduce the content of the Primary Syllabus, and to ensure a smooth transition to lower secondary.

At the time of writing, however, the system remains as follows:

The Secondary School Entrance Examination is taken at the end of Primary VI (ages 12 - 13). It is a competitive examination in English, Mathematics and Chinese, and unsuccessful candidates may go to private schools if they wish. Successful candidates enter either Anglo-Chinese (English medium) of Chinese Middle (Chinese medium) Government Schools, the former being generally preferred.

At the end of Secondary V the Hong Kong Certificate of Education is taken to qualify for 6th form entry. Some subjects may be offered either in English or Chinese (Cantonese). Students take an examination for entry to Hong Kong University (in the case of Anglo-Chinese schools), after 2 years of 6th Form study, or to the Chinese University of Hong Kong (in the case of Chinese medium schools) after one year of 6th Form study.

3.7 Success in examinations in English is required for every step in the above educational ladder.

3.8 The choice of syllabuses and textbooks is left entirely to schools, but the Education Department regularly sends out a very full list of recommended textbooks in all subjects.

3.9 There is a special English Section Inspectorate in the Department of Education. As well as inspecting and advising English teachers in the schools, this body took over the direction of the Language Centre (formerly the English Language Teaching Centre) when the Ministry of Overseas Development withdrew their financial support (with which the Centre had been started) in 1970. The Centre already gave refresher courses for primary teachers of English. The Inspectorate added courses for secondary teachers of English and similar refresher courses for teachers of Chinese. The Centre also prepares tapes and other teaching materials, and the Inspectorate distributes lists of these to the schools.

3.10 There is some English for Special Purposes in the secondary modern schools and the Polytechnic, and a course, or series of courses, in the use of English for Commercial Purposes offered by the extra-mural department of Hong Kong University which has proved popular. General standards of English have deteriorated in the past 10 years, with the replacement of expatriates by local teachers, and the demands of an increasing population for the key, which English constitutes, to higher education and better career prospects. It is becoming clear that more attention needs to be paid to the teaching of English for Special Purposes.

3.11 Secondary level evening classes for adults in a wide range of subjects are provided by the Government. English Language Courses at beginners as well as intermediate and advanced levels attract numerous applicants, averaging something in the region of 10,000 per year, of which 2,000 can be accommodated. A very comprehensive programme of adult English, Language, Literature and English for Special Purposes is offered by Hong Kong University. In 1974, over 59,777 adults were attending Government adult education courses of various kinds.

4. Teaching Cadre

4.1 The teaching cadre is entirely Chinese, with very occasional British or American expatriates at the university level.

4.2 The 3 Teacher Training Colleges are of a fairly high quality, able to meet the demands of the Government institutions but most teachers in private schools are untrained or inadequately trained. In 1974 there were 7,350 graduates and 17,616 trained non-graduates in a total teaching cadre of 35,549, a proportion of just over 60%. The unqualified teachers are all to be found in the private sector; 100% of the teachers in Government schools are qualified.

4.3 Both Universities provide a one-year course in Education; the 3 Teacher Training Colleges offer a one or 2 year post-school course, as well as in-service and part-time training courses. From 1975, a third year course is planned, offering more advanced specialist training in the teaching of various subjects, including English. General English will be a compulsory component of all third year courses, with the aim of improving the communicative skills. Summer courses are given by the Language Teaching Centre to an increasing number of teachers, and the Centre also provides refresher courses for trained but non-graduate primary teachers.

4.4 There are no local professional organisations for teachers of English, but the Inspectorate of English, through the Language Centre, fulfils a number of the functions of such a body, in that it runs a specialist library, sends circulars to all schools on in-service courses, distributes language teaching notes and notes on trends in curriculum development, and publishes an 'English Bulletin' and an annual journal.

4.5 Recession, the consequent need to reduce expenditure on education, and particularly on the expansion of the secondary school system, has produced some teacher unemployment. Private schools, staffed by untrained, and therefore, inexpensive teachers, are reluctant to employ the increasing numbers of trained teachers, which will come on to the market in 1975 and 1976. There is some public discontent at Government reluctance to bring pressure on private institutions to improve their standards by employing more of these trained teachers.

5. Teaching Materials

5.1 Teaching materials seem to be generally adequate, both in quality and amount, though in a number of cases unqualified teachers do not make the best use of the books they have. There are large numbers of British books, often printed in Hong Kong, and a flourishing textbook market. Hong Kong is a publishing and printing centre for the region.

5.2 By and large the pattern is one of diversity. The Education Department issues lists of recommended textbooks for the teacher's guidance, but the teacher is not forced to choose even within this quite comprehensive list. Over the years, however, and with the effect of such centralising influences as the Language Centre, a pattern has become visible, and certain textbooks seem generally preferred over others.

5.3 The three most commonly used textbooks at secondary level are:

5.3.1 Howe & Smith: Guided English for Hong Kong (OUP)

5.3.2 Etherton: Modern English for Chinese Students (Longman)

5.3.3 Etherton: Objective English Tests (Longman)

The most commonly used dictionary is:

Hornby: Advanced Learners' Dictionary (OUP - ELBS)

In addition to the above, however, a wide variety of books on Composition, Grammar, Objective Tests, etc are used. Indeed there is a common belief that the efficiency of a school may be assessed by the number of books a pupil is required to purchase. Moreover, the Chinese traditional respect for the written word produces in teachers a reliance on textbooks and an inflexible attitude towards their use which it is difficult to change.

5.4 "In educational technology Hong Kong emerges quite sharply as a pacemaker for Asia", says one visiting expert's report. Statements such as this should be read as referring only to the Government sector, but here all teaching aids are very widely used.

The Language Centre uses 'View and Teach' and a number of other films, as well as producing or dubbing tapes for local institutions. The British Council's records show a very high turnover in tapes and films borrowed by various institutions. In addition materials are often produced locally.

The Hong Kong Educational Television Service is a model of its kind. The English Language Teaching programmes are being adapted for use in other countries in the Far East and for teaching Chinese in the schools, with the aim of producing real bilingualism. The studios are equipped to professional standards. So far one programme per week for 30 weeks a year have been produced, as well as materials for integrating the programmes with class

instruction: these are distributed to teachers with questionnaires on the effectiveness of the programmes. A teachers advisory panel exists for shaping future programmes and vacation courses are held to train teachers in the best use of the programmes. The present series is only for primary schools and plans to extend the service to secondary schools have been temporarily shelved because of lack of funds.

5.5 A large range of teaching materials is produced locally. In addition to educational television, there is a free tape dubbing service for schools offered by the Language Teaching Centre, which has also produced its own 15 hour tape programme designed for the single tape recorder available in most schools. The Centre also distributes Language Teaching notes to all teachers of English and publishes an 'English Bulletin', and Annual Journal, and notes on 'Trends in Curriculum Development' 6 times a year. It has also produced a 15 minute colour film on English teaching.

In addition to the Language Teaching Centre, other bodies, like the Hong Kong University Extra-Mural Department, also produce teaching materials for their own use.

6. English Outside the Educational System

6.1 There are no commercial schools of English from Britain, but there are a number of evening schools and institutes outside the Government system. These are Chinese operated, run for profit, and cater for working class Chinese. Their standards are generally poor and they are excessively costly. Nevertheless, although the extra-mural classes run by the Universities are of a far higher standard and are easily available, the demand for English Language tuition is such that the private commercial institutes face no difficulty in finding students.

6.2 Some English for commercial purposes is taught in the private institutes.

7. British Support for the Teaching of English

7.1 From 1964-1970 there was an ACE Officer attached to the Education Department who was responsible for setting up the English Language Teaching Centre, now the Language Centre.

At present, the British Council representation is down to one, the Representative at the British Council Office, and there are no British supported posts at any educational institutes.

There are 2 British volunteers in Hong Kong: supplied by the Council for International Contact to the International Social Services organisation.

7.2 The key post in the past seems to have been the ACE attached to the Education Department under whose direction the Language Centre was set up, with considerable effect on Teacher Training syllabuses, examinations and textbooks.

Representative is heavily involved in ELT; his advice has been sought on the new primary and secondary syllabuses and he has been asked to make recommendations on the English content of the 3rd year College of Education Courses. At Government request he is engaged in a survey of the Adult Education programmes which offer English. He is also Chairman of a Working Party surveying the use of English in Hong Kong.

7.3 The Council does no direct teaching but helps to improve the quality of teaching in Government and private schools, colleges and universities. Of its two sets of English Language Units and tapes, one is on permanent loan to the Language Centre, where it is used for in-service teacher training and the other is in constant demand by teachers at the Council Centre. There is also a heavy turnover in the library and films, especially in the ELT section.

1975 will be the last year in which the Council will conduct the GCE examinations in Macao. Discussions have been held with London University, which, it is hoped, will lead to the establishment of independent centres in the Portuguese Colony. The Council role as the Overseas Authority will continue but with reduced supervisory responsibilities.

The Council provides 5 or 6 awards for ELT annually, gives financial support to cultural activities in collaboration with local organisations and cooperates with learned societies, university faculties and institutions at the postgraduate and professional level, especially in medicine, engineering and agriculture, through scholarships, the loan of films, specialist tours, the presentation of publications and the supply of reprint facilities.

8. American Support for Teaching of English

There is no American involvement in ELT in Hong Kong. The Yale-in-China programme and other university attachments and exchange arrangements with the Chinese University of Hong Kong are mainly intended to help American graduates in their Chinese studies.

9. General Statement

9.1 The main strength of the English Language Teaching situation in Hong Kong lies in the colony's position as a cultural bridge between the East and West, and in its need to maintain this position - without it the very reason for Hong Kong's existence disappears. English is never likely to be the first language, nor the language of the mass of the people, but it remains the medium of most of the activities on which the colony depends for its existence and prosperity. The demand for English is and will remain very strong, but perhaps never for more than a minority of the population and will have to co-exist with a national cultural demand for Chinese.

9.2 The second strength of the ELT situation in Hong Kong lies in the very sophisticated level of its trade, tourism, banking and international commerce. These, and the peripheral services attached to them, demand the daily use of English at near native-speaker standard on a wide scale, and the intensely competitive spirit by which Hong Kong thrives in relation to its competitors in the world and which keeps it in the forefront of technological advance will only increase this high level of activity in the English language as time goes by. This obviously makes for a very favourable language learning situation.

9.3 The most obvious strength lies in Hong Kong's links with the UK and in its position as a Crown Colony, but political restrictions apart, the two foregoing factors might well keep the English Language Teaching situation healthy even if Hong Kong were no longer a Crown Colony.

9.4 The main weakness of the English Language situation lies in the private sector, in what is admittedly the large majority of the population beneath

the relatively thin if highly sophisticated upper level. Although the quality of English here is low, the demand is nevertheless real, and the comparative youth of the population (35% are under 15, 50% under 21) combined with the wider dissemination of Government services such as educational television will do something to raise the level here, though much more slowly than at the higher levels.

10. Current Research and Bibliography

10.1 Researches into the teaching of English as a second language are taking place in a number of institutions. These are coordinated by the Hong Kong Council for Educational Research. In general Hong Kong seems more interested in applying the results of research already done and tested in the field.

10.2 English as a 'functional tool'. An extra-mural programme in Hong Kong - Duncan Macintosh - Adult Education Volume 44 Number 6.

Hong Kong - Report on the Conference of Experts on the Teaching of English: Statement. Appendix C - ETIC Arch. K951. 25 OX OBG.

English Language Teaching Centre Information Sheet - ETIC Archiv. K951-25 OX OK.

English in the Chinese School - Chien Nai-Hsim - from the 1962 Chung Chi Conference - ETIC Arch. 951.25.

English Teaching in Hong Kong - ETIC Archiv. K951. 25 OX OBS.

English Language Teaching and Textbooks in Hong Kong - P D Reynolds - Educational Studies and Research Papers No 3 University of Hong Kong Department of Education Research Unit.